

The Hill

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As expected, the days following the president's first State of the Union address have been filled with a glut of news stories analyzing each new policy proposal and handicapping its odds of passage in the bitterly partisan environment on Capitol Hill.

But what struck me most last Wednesday night was the presence of a word that has little to do with policy or politics, and everything to do with the unique character of the American people.

Hope.

We haven't heard much about hope in the last year. It's somewhat surprising, given its dominance during the 2008 election cycle. But hope — the unyielding belief that we, as individuals and as a people, can achieve greater things — is the most critical ingredient for revitalizing our nation after the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Perhaps I found myself focusing on hope because of the company with which I watched the president's address. Instead of sitting in the Capitol, I watched the speech from an even more inspiring position: the living room of a South St. Louis family who embody the best of what our country has to offer — and the worst of the damage suffered in last year's recession.

MaryJo Clark, a high school art teacher, and her husband, Tim, play by the rules.

They work hard and pay their taxes; they vote regularly and serve on juries; they diligently paid off the mortgage on their home, haven't accumulated credit card debt, and even managed to put away some money for retirement.

But like so many others, the Clark family is struggling to get by. As MaryJo explained in a letter she sent my office, her husband Tim, their daughter and others in their family are unemployed, and several family members have struggled to find affordable health coverage because of rising costs and discrimination against people with pre-existing conditions.

Despite all this, the Clarks will not quit. MaryJo and Tim possess the kind of indomitable spirit that has made this country great.

This is what defines the American people: our determination, our aspiration to achieve greatness, and our refusal to give up hope, even in the face of tough times.

The day after the State of the Union, I was thinking of MaryJo and Tim while meeting with several St. Louis-based small businesses.

A trucking company employing creative strategies to reduce their fuel costs and environmental impact; a construction company that creates the infrastructure needed for telecommunications and alternative energy technologies — these entrepreneurs personify the good old American ingenuity that will help fuel job growth in the new economy.

They know that government can't do everything.

And frankly, that's not what they want. But there are things we can do in Washington right now that will make it easier for their businesses to grow and thrive.

We can help them hire additional workers by offering tax incentives; we can break up the credit crisis by encouraging community lenders to make the investments businesses need to grow; we can focus on transportation, clean energy and broadband infrastructure improvements that support short- and long-term business needs; we can seek to open new export markets through greater international engagement; and we can ease the enormous burden of healthcare costs by passing reforms that will give small businesses access to affordable coverage.

Most importantly, we can set aside the partisan bickering that has prevented us from getting things done on Capitol Hill, and focus on working together to restore the American Dream for middle-class families.

In her letter to me, MaryJo Clark closed with the following plea: “I ask that you not forget those of us that you’ve been elected to serve.

These issues may not be real to you, but for far too many of us, they are a harsh reality.”

In the face of remarkable challenges, MaryJo and Tim — and millions of Americans like them — have refused to give up hope. They are pulling together, uniting to help their families, friends and neighbors get through this tough time.

No wonder they are so repulsed by the petty politics of obstruction and division that have overtaken this town.

As I return to Washington, I find myself reenergized by the don’t-give-up, work-together attitude of the people I am so honored to serve.

I hope my colleagues find themselves similarly inspired, and that we can all spend a little less time thinking about our own political futures, and a lot more time getting down to the business of doing what is right for MaryJo and Tim, and millions of families just like them.

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